The Sources of the Racial and Ethnic Composition of the American Population: Past, Present, and Future

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There are contradictory popular images of the origins of the American population and the demographic processes that led to its creation. One image is that of the melting pot, which suggests that immigration from different lands and intermarriage among the descendants of immigrants have created a blended population that has forgotten its ancestral roots. A second image is that of cultural pluralism, where distinct groups coexist within a broader society while maintaining their respective cultures and identities. A final image is that of a segregated and hierarchical society, where social status is delineated by race, religion, or ancestry. Although the melting pot metaphor generally applies to the descendants from Europe while the racial divide is symbolized by a "one drop" ideology that designates most persons with partial African ancestry as black, there is little consistency in the logic of how subpopulation boundaries are created, maintained, or erased.

Despite the ambiguity and uncertainty of racial measurement, reports about the current and future racial composition of the U.S. are treated with front page coverage by the mass media and as topics of social and political significance by the public at large. While sensationalist projections about the impacts of immigration or claims that Latinos are now the largest "minority" in the United States are often taken as demographic truths, details like the fact that Latinos can be members of *any* race or that individuals may identify with multiple races in Census and other official surveys are buried in subsequent paragraphs or ignored altogether.

In this paper, we will offer a critique of traditional demographic accounts of the sources of diversity in the American population. In the demographic balancing equation, population change can occur only through natural increase, mortality, and migration. The logic holds that if comprehensive data were available, it would be possible to fully explain changes in the size and demographic composition of populations by accounting for fertility and mortality differentials as well as selective immigration and emigration. This balancing equation underlies population projections by race and ethnicity as well as accounts of historical changes in population composition. In the early decades of the 20th century, demographers and statisticians were enlisted to measure changes in the composition of the United States to justify federal policies that restricted immigration by national origins. Today, there are increasingly refined population models that incorporate fertility, immigration, and even intermarriage that allow demographers inside and outside the Census Bureau to project the future racial and ethnic composition of the American population.

The fundamental problem with conventional accounts of demographic composition and change is that racial and ethnic groups are not discrete populations. Indeed, the melting pot image itself presupposes intermarriage of persons from different populations, the natural results of which are offspring with mixed ancestry. Although multiracialism is widely held to be a 20th century phenomenon, fueled primarily by the "interracial baby boom" in the wake of Loving v. Virginia (Korgen 1998), mixed ancestry was widely observed (if not so widely acknowledged) as early as the 18th century (Spencer 2006). Nor has it been limited to peoples of European ancestry. Even if unacknowledged in census and survey responses, nearly 3/4ths of African Americans and approximately

1/4th of whites are descended from mixed African and European ancestry (Myrdal 1944; Shriver et al. 2003; Stuckert 1958; 1976; Yinger 1985). At present, estimates of outmarriage among Asians and Latinos range from 20 to 40 percent, and while outmarriage among African Americans is much lower, rates have risen considerably in recent decades.

An even more important challenge to demographic accounts of composition and change is that racial and ethnic identities can be a matter of choice rather than an ascribed characteristic that are fixed at birth. Self-definition of race and ethnicity was introduced, perhaps inadvertently, with the 1960 Census, when householders began filling out census forms for themselves (Prewitt 2005). The freedom to define oneself was widened further with recent revisions to the classification system which allowed individuals, for the first time, to "mark one or more races" beginning with the 2000 Census. The choice to identify with multiple races has been mandated, if not yet fully implemented, in all governmental statistical systems at the national and local level (Office of Management and Budget 1997). Of course, the group(s) that individuals choose to identify with may not correspond to their ancestry, or to what others may think based on observable characteristics like physical appearance.

Yet these fragile foundations of racial and ethnic measurement, both past and present, coexist with a social structure where even deeply flawed categories are strongly correlated with socioeconomic status, life expectancy, and nearly every indicator of well being and life chances. This enduring reality motivates the present exercise to identify sources of racial and ethnic composition while explicitly accounting for wide margins of uncertainty in racial classification and measurement.

In this study, we will draw upon historical patterns of immigration and natural increase to derive expected population counts for various racial and national origin groups. These estimates will then be compared with official census estimates of racial and ethnic composition, and differences between the two sources will be linked to identity shifts stemming from intermarriage and macro-level changes in racial/ethnic identification. This paper will also include a critical review of the literature on the role of classificatory dynamics as an emerging and important source of population change

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